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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000094

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [ASEC](#) [FJ](#)

SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 2/7/07: SHUFFLING AMBS? CUTTING CIVIL
SERVICE. INTIMIDATING METHODISTS. RAISING CONCERNS ABOUT
JUDICIARY.

REF: A. SUVA 92

[B](#). SUVA 89 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D)

Summary

[1](#). (C) Replacement of some or all of Fiji's current
ambassadors is in the works. A prospect for PermRep in New
York is reluctant to accept the job because of Australia, New
Zealand, U.S. visa-ban worries. Interim government efforts
to cut civil-service costs continue, indicating severe
fiscal-crunch concerns. Public-sector unions have threatened
strike action. Under RFMF pressure, the Methodist Church has
withdrawn a resolution harshly critical of the coup and its
leaders. Human Rights Watch has called for the interim
government to respect fundamental rights and to make a swift
return to democracy. A senior judge is very concerned about
the state of Fiji's judiciary. End summary.

A re-shuffle of Fiji ambassadors

[2](#). (C) When former Home Affairs State Minister Konrote came
by the Embassy on 2/6 to ask about an RFMF deployment to Iraq
(ref A), he mentioned that Bainimarama has approached him
about becoming Fiji's Permanent Representative to the UN.
Former PermRep Savua concluded his tour last fall, and the
Qarase Government named a replacement who had not taken up
the job before the coup. Konrote said the interim government
is considering a wholesale re-shuffle of ambassadorships.
(Comment: This is not surprising given that many current
ambassadors are tied to events of 2000 and/or have been seen
as buddies of Qarase.) Konrote said he has not yet accepted
the New York offer because he is worried about Australia, New
Zealand, and U.S. visa-ban repercussions on himself and his
family. Konrote's sons travel a lot. Konrote said, none the
less, he has informed Bainimarama that he is willing to "help
out" the interim government behind the scenes.

Visa bans having effect

[3](#). (U) Interim Attorney General Sayed Khaiyum reportedly told
Radio Australia today that potential staff for the interim
government's anti-corruption commission are being scared off
by Australia and New Zealand travel bans. Note: the Embassy
has received some inquiries from people offered
interim-government posts about the breadth of the USG
visa-sanction. End note.

Bainimarama's coup motivation: Back to 2000

14. (C) Former State Minister Konrote had a long and distinguished military career, culminating as BrigGen in command of all UN forces in Lebanon. When we asked Bainimarama's motivations for the coup, Konrote referred back to the events of 2000, especially the November mutiny of soldiers at military HQ when Bainimarama was nearly killed. Konrote noted that Bainimarama had never been in a combat situation. Unlike senior Army officers who had seen action in Lebanon and other hot spots, Bainimarama's only PKO experience was with MFO Sinai during a peaceful period. Thus, when he was fired at in 2000, the experience had a significant psychological effect that Bainimarama still carries. When, in Bainimarama's view, the Qarase Government did not ensure harsh enough punishment for some of those responsible for 2000, it really rankled.

Civil-service cuts: big savings; big headaches?

15. (C) The interim Minister for the Public Service, Poseci Bune, has told the media that a proposed cut of public-service salaries by 5% and a proposed reduction of the mandatory retirement age from 60 to 55 will save the interim government F\$150 million in 2007, taking a huge burden off taxpayers. Public-sector unions have cried foul, are exploring court options, and have threatened strike action. Per ref B, all indications are that the interim government's fiscal situation is dire. To cut bloated civil service numbers and costs is a rational step that the popularly elected Qarase Government never dared to do. It will be interesting to see if the military will be able to stifle union reaction.

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Methodist Church withdraws anti-coup resolution

16. (U) Per ref B, Fiji's powerful Methodist Church issued a strongly worded resolution late last week calling for Bainimarama to resign, for President Iloilo to be retired from office, for Fiji to return to democracy and rule of law, and for affirmative action programs, popular in the church's ethnic-Fijian community, to be retained. The RFMF responded vigorously, including by detaining two church leaders for three days at the Army camp. Not surprisingly given the intimidation, the church general secretary announced on Feb. 6, the same day the two leaders were released, that the resolution has been withdrawn. The general secretary seemingly admitted that the church's top leadership had "briefly" seen the paper and had approved it, but he suggested the paper had not been formally endorsed by the church standing committee.

Human Rights Watch weighs in on Fiji issues

17. (U) New York-based Human Rights Watch has written to Bainimarama and Iloilo seeking an unambiguous commitment to respect fundamental human rights and a swift return to an elected government in Fiji. HRW expressed concern about Iloilo's effort to provide immunity to all security personnel, including for serious human rights abuses.

Judicial concerns

18. (C) The New Zealand High Commission in Suva hosted a very modest Waitangi Day reception last night, with nobody from the military or interim government invited. Court of Appeals Chief Justice Ward was in attendance. He was scathing about Justices Anthony Gates and Nazhat Shameem for horribly politicizing the Fiji judiciary. Ward suggested the court system's credibility is in a perilous state. When the conversation turned to why only one case related to the coup has thus far been filed, Ward and his wife speculated that the military is intimidating both plaintiffs and their lawyers. Prime Minister Qarase's lawyer reportedly has been stymied from filing suit because Qarase must swear an

affidavit, but he is marooned on his home island in Lau; and the only government official on that island who is authorized to witness the affidavit has been off-island for weeks.

Accommodating the Aussies

¶9. (C) New Aussie High Commissioner James Batley presented credentials to President Iloilo last week. He said Iloilo seemed OK physically, but not mentally. He asked the same question three times and clearly was dependent on prompts from his official secretary. During prep for the ceremony, MFA protocol noted an expectation that Batley would move directly from credentials to a meeting with interim PM Bainimarama. When Batley suggested that could be a problem, MFA quickly backed down. Per Suva 84, Australia has agreed to permit Iloilo to enter soon for a routine medical checkup. The Fiji Government made clear it was willing to switch Iloilo's military detail to a police detail to ease visa-ban issues; but Australia said it would accept Iloilo's normal complement.

Comment

¶10. (C) The timing of the Methodist Church's outspoken statement against the coup just before last weekend is interesting. Many sources tell us that, in the minds of many ethnic Fijians, coup instability continues. People are angry and are contemplating what options they possess in the face of the RFMF's firearms. The Church's statement surely fed discussions after Sunday services and over kava bowls during the weekend, even though the statement's forced public withdrawal was inevitable.
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